

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

Remarks Prior to a Meeting With President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia
May 27, 2010

President Obama. Well, I want to officially welcome President Sirleaf to the Oval Office. I have been an extraordinary admirer of her work for many years now. I fondly recall the speech that she delivered in a joint session of Congress when I was still in the Senate.

The United States and Liberia are close friends, longstanding partners, and Liberia is now emerging from a very difficult period in its history. Part of the reason that it has been able to emerge is because of the heroism and the courage of President Sirleaf. Her own personal story obviously is extraordinary—somebody who came from being a prisoner to the first female President not just of her own country but also on the continent.

And over the last several years, what we've seen is a continued determination on her part to have a full accounting of some of the tragedies that took place earlier, making sure that the country is refocused on development, being willing to tackle corruption, which obviously plagues not just Liberia, but countries throughout the continent of Africa. She has been committed to rule of law. She has made strides in reforming her judiciary.

And in all these endeavors, I want to make sure that the people of Liberia understand—and I certainly want you, Madam President, to understand—that the United States is going to be a constant friend and partner in these efforts. We are working with Liberia on a food initiative that will help to create greater food security and independence in the country. We continue to work with the Liberian Government on issues like maternal health and education.

There has been extraordinary cooperation between our two countries in the issue of counterterrorism as well as drug trafficking, because unfortunately, the western coast of Africa increasingly is seen as a place where drug traffickers internationally may be able to operate with impunity. And so on all these issues, we have been able to cultivate a strong partnership, a strong relationship, and I want President Sirleaf to know that that will continue.

I also want to commend her for her commitment to democracy. There are going to be legislative and Presidential elections in 2011. And part of President Sirleaf's legacy is that she will continue to usher in a sense that democracy is the regular way of doing business in Liberia. And in that way, she can be an example for countries like Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire and Niger that I think can—should look to Liberia as an example for democracy and rule of law.

So, Madam President, welcome. We are grateful to you for your extraordinary work. I still recall in your speech that part of the reason you ran was because you wanted to see the children of Liberia smiling again, and I want you to know that we have that same hope, that same dream for Liberia and we'll be there with you every step of the way.

President Johnson Sirleaf. Mr. President, I want to thank you very much. I'm extremely proud, extremely pleased to have this opportunity to meet with you.

In 2006, when our Government started, we inherited a broken country—devastated by war, people displaced, infrastructure broken, institutions dysfunctional—but we said that we were going to make Liberia rise again.

I come today on behalf of the Liberian people to say that we've made a lot of progress in that commitment. We've been able to maintain peace for 7 years now. And I say that today, our

children who are entering first grade have known—not known a gun or not had to run, and that's great progress.

Our security sector reform, with the United States supports, has come a long way with the training of our new army. Today, we're reopening our economy—our mining, forestry, and agriculture sectors. We've tackled our debt. We're beginning to provide basic services by restoring infrastructure such as roads, clinics, and schools and lights and water, things that our people have been deprived of for more than two decades.

And we're also establishing the rule of law and governance. Freedoms—we say today that all freedoms, basic fundamental freedoms, are allowed in the country. And we're very proud of that.

We have challenges, and I'll be the first to admit that—challenges in national capacity because most of our brains left the country. I want to thank you for your approval of the DED that extended them for 18 months, allowing them to stay a little bit while we prepare to receive them. Corruption; the rule of law; our judiciary system and its weakness; unemployment among the many young who did not have the opportunity to go to school, who knew only war and violence in their young days—but those challenges we see as the ones that we have to tackle. And the progress we have made enable us to have the commitment and capacity to meet those challenges.

I want you to know that the United States has been a great partner to us. We could not have achieved the progress that we have had if we had not had the support in those initial days when we were just scrambling and looking for the ways to be able to go forward. The U.S. was there as a great partner.

And so the administration, as well as the Congress, have been very supportive of us. It has continued through these 4 years. And I'm just here to say that the return on your investment is beginning to come. We hope that that return will be even greater in the next few years when we consolidate the peace and when we are able to deliver basic services to our people.

I bring you greetings on behalf of the Liberian people.

President Obama. Excellent. Well, thank you so much. Thank you, everybody. Thank you, guys.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:26 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. President Johnson Sirleaf referred to DED, the deferred enforced departure protection status for Liberians in the United States.

Categories: Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Liberia, President Johnson Sirleaf.

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